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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 COLOMBO 000997

SIPDIS

STATE FOR SA/INS  
USPACOM FOR FPA

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [MV](#)

SUBJECT: MALDIVES: "BRIGHT DAY FOR DEMOCRACY" DARKENED BY

REFORMISTS' ARRESTS

REF: COLOMBO 0946

Classified By: DCM JAMES F. ENTWISTLE. REASON: 1.4 (B,D).

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SUMMARY  
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1. (C) Early on June 2--the day the People's Majlis was expected to rubber-stamp President Gayoom's decision to allow the registration of political parties--police arrested six members of the opposition Maldivian Democratic Party (MDP). Government Spokesman Dr. Ahmed Shaheed described the arrests as "pre-emptive," based on information police had reportedly obtained that MDP members were planning to disrupt the June 2 Majlis session. He said he expected the detainees would be released shortly--provided none of their supporters protested the arrests--and predicted the Majlis would approve the registration of parties, ushering in a "bright day for democracy" in Maldives. MDP activists in Colombo denied any intention to disrupt the proceedings. By COB June 2 the Majlis had unanimously endorsed the measure and all six detainees were reportedly in the process of being released. Nonetheless, these arbitrary arrests cast a dark pall over the "bright day for democracy" and indicate the Government has yet to figure out how to accommodate actual opposition. End summary.

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PRE-DAWN ARRESTS DARKEN "BRIGHT DAY"  
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2. (SBU) At about 4:00 a.m. local time in Male' on June 2, police arrested four Maldivian Democratic Party (MDP) activists, including MDP Chairperson Mohamad Nasheed, who had returned to Maldives on April 30 from self-imposed exile abroad. Two other MDP members were arrested the afternoon of the same day. Their arrests coincided with the day scheduled for the People's Majlis to review, at President Maumoon Abdul Gayoom's request, the Attorney General's opinion allowing the registration and operation of political parties (Reftel).

3. (C) In a June 2 telephone conversation, Presidential Spokesman Dr. Ahmed Shaheed told poloff that the arrests had been made because police had obtained information that the MDP activists planned to disrupt the Majlis' proceedings later in the day. The police had a choice whether to sit on this information and allow the expected disruption to occur, Shaheed said, or to take "pre-emptive" measures to detain the suspects, thereby ensuring a peaceful Majlis session. In consultation with the Justice and Home Ministries, the police decided to make the arrests, he said. (Note: It can be safely assumed that Gayoom approved the arrests.) Shaheed added that he expected the detainees to be released by the end of the day if MDP supporters did not attempt to create another disturbance by protesting the arrests. Although the MDP office remained open, another area that the MDP had been using for public discussions had been sealed by police, Shaheed acknowledged.

4. (C) Shaheed said that he expected the initiative to recognize political parties would pass smoothly. Majlis approval was not really even needed since the Attorney General had already determined the measure was consistent with the Constitution, he added; the President had forwarded his request to the Majlis merely as a formality. The Majlis' anticipated approval would usher in a "bright day for democracy in Maldives," Shaheed asserted.

5. (C) When asked if the arrests of pro-reform activists might not cast a pall over the day's brightness, Shaheed acknowledged that the day had been "marred by these developments," but reiterated that the detentions were necessary to avert MDP plans for "chaos" and "confrontation." Poloff questioned the motivation for MDP to disrupt the Majlis proceedings, noting that MDP representatives had expressed support for the measure, which would allow them at long last to function as a party in Maldives, and overall optimism at the direction the country seemed to be heading. She noted that the Embassy had shared some of that optimism and was concerned that the arrests could indicate that things

were heading in the wrong direction. The MDP says one thing to Embassies in English and another thing to crowds in Dhivehi, Shaheed answered; MDP had recently been "calling for street action" against the Majlis session, he averred. The MDP's priority is not democratic reform, he continued, but "to have the Government of Maldives fall." The MDP does not want the legalization of political parties because it fears that pro-Gayoom forces will form a party that "will attract more mainstream talent" and capable people, Shaheed charged.

16. (SBU) On May 31 the Embassy had received a diplomatic note from the Government of Republic of Maldives (GORM) that, in retrospect, appeared to presage the arrests. The four-page note refers to "continuing efforts to subvert and derail the reform process," especially by "a number of political opportunists, drug offenders and ex-convicts (who) have called for the immediate and unconditional registration of a political party, insisting that it could be done within the framework of the existing Constitution." This band of purported reprobates, the note warns, "have been inciting public opinion . . . and have stepped up efforts to destabilize the country and undermine law and order." So far the GORM has "acted with great restraint" with respect to these provocations and "has been doing all that it can to foster confidence in the reform process and to carry out the work in an open and transparent manner with the engagement of the international community."

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MDP HAD PLANNED CELEBRATION, NOT SIT-IN  
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17. (C) Nazim Sattar, an MDP council member in Colombo, told poloff that his organization had planned to hold a peaceful assembly in front of the Majlis building during the June 2 session to celebrate its anticipated approval of the party registration measure. The MDP had no interest in disrupting the session, he asserted. None of the detainees' families has been able to see them and no one knew where they were being held, he said. Abdul Bari, a Maldivian employee of UNDP familiar with the MDP, disputed Shaheed's claims that party activists had been calling for "street action," stating that he had never heard any such rhetoric in Dhivehi, and adding that the MDP had every reason to support the anticipated approval of party registration by the Majlis. As of mid-day June 2, the People's Majlis session was reportedly proceeding without incident, according to several sources. Bari told poloff that he had observed no one, except police and National Security Service personnel, outside the Majlis building.

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"HEALTHY BEGINNING"  
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18. (C) At COB June 2 Dr. Shaheed told us that the Majlis--including MDP members--had unanimously endorsed the measure, which he described as "a healthy beginning" to multi-party democracy in Maldives. On June 5 the Attorney General is expected to introduce a bill before Parliament on a legal framework for party registration and operation. In the interim, Shaheed said, the President will proclaim "a provisional framework" that will allow a quicker start to the process of party registration. When asked if he expected the MDP would be allowed to register, he replied, "Of course." All six detainees, moreover, were "in the process of being released," Shaheed said; at COB they were being brought by boat to Male' from the detention center on Dhoonidhoo Island. The police were also taking steps to remove the barricades they had constructed to seal the MDP meeting place off from public access during the day, he added.

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COMMENT  
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19. (C) In the past the GORM has attempted to discredit MDP members as Muslim fundamentalists to us and as Christian missionaries to the Maldivian public. Now they are apparently "drug offenders" and "ex-convicts." (This last charge is largely true, since the GORM arrested so many of them during the August 12-13 civil unrest of last year.) The GORM had been billing June 2 as a great day for democratic reform and the advent of multiparty pluralism in Maldives; "pre-emptive" arrests of reform proponents will do little to convince either the reform-hungry Maldivian public or the skeptical international community of the sincerity of GORM intentions. As today's Kafka-esque episode indicates, the GORM has yet to figure out how to accommodate democratic opposition.  
LUNSTEAD